

A Lesson on English



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Sarcasm: Tearing the Flesh

by Sara Tusek

The word “sarcasm” comes from the Greek, and literally means “the tearing of flesh.”

This definition gives you an idea of the intention and effect of sarcasm. Recognizing sarcasm and responding to it in ways that don’t do damage to yourself or to your relationships are necessary skills for daily life in most cultures, as sarcasm is a way to express what is otherwise socially unacceptable.

What is sarcasm?

The basic formula for sarcasm is to say the opposite of what you actually mean.

For example, someone gets a haircut and you think it looks bad. Instead of saying, “Wow! *Bad haircut!*” which is openly rude, you say, “*Great haircut!*” but your tone of voice or body language (eye-rolling or raising an eyebrow) communicates the opposite.

Most sarcasm is not subtle. People who use sarcasm typically observe what is obvious and make a remark that is seemingly humorous about it.

For example, Lucy organizes a potluck dinner (“*potluck*” means “*whatever is available to bring as a contribution*”), and everyone brings a dessert. There are no meats, no salads, no pasta dishes and no vegetables. A sarcastic comment might be

“*Well, Lucy, looks like the main courses are chocolate cake and lemon pie!*” Depending on Lucy’s mood, she might laugh along with the sarcasm, but she might feel unjustly blamed, in public, for a chance occurrence.

Sarcasm vs. irony

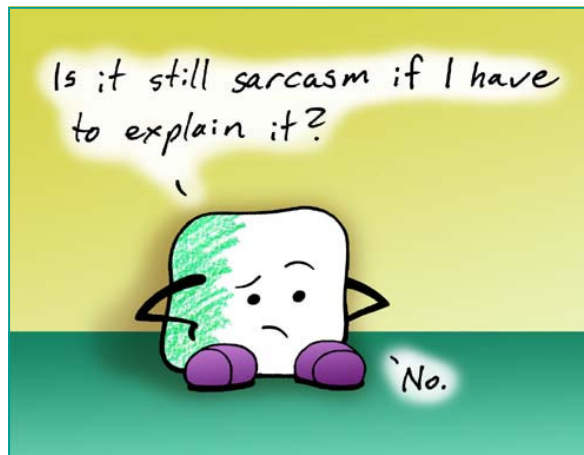
Sarcasm is closely related to irony, but differs in one key aspect: irony simply comments on the difference between appearance (or expectation) and reality, while sarcasm uses the difference as a weapon.

Here is an ironic statement: “Here it is, the month of June, and we just had a snowstorm!” The speaker is commenting on the expectation that June will be warm and pleasant, contrasted with the reality that it’s snowing and windy.

Note that irony is not insulting to a person. The intent is not to hurt anyone, or question her judgment, but merely to make a mildly humorous comment in a situation that’s out of the ordinary.

A sarcastic remark in this situation might be, “Well, looks like the weatherman was right again!” (*when the Channel 12 weatherman, Tom, had predicted a sunny, warm day*) or “you surely did a great job of planning your June outdoor wedding!” (*when your friend Mary’s plans were destroyed by the snow*).

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Sara and Jarda Tusek with
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Sarcasm *—from p. 1*

In the sarcastic comments, a person’s judgment is questioned; Tom and Mary look foolish. Even if the comments are made lightly, there’s still a sharp point hidden in the sarcastic humor. Tom is probably used to being teased, but it still stings. Even though Mary laughs, being a good sport, just maybe she doesn’t find the snow, and her ruined wedding, quite as amusing as you do.

Why are people sarcastic?

Sarcasm provides a way to express aggression without being openly confrontational. Aggressive thoughts and objections are clothed as humor, allowing the sarcastic person to “get away with” being mean.

Sarcasm is the humor of the underdog, of the person who has little real power or authority in a given situation. It’s the favorite humor of adolescence.

The sarcastic remark is indirectly defiant; if a more powerful person objects to the sarcasm, the speaker can say she was “only kidding.” (“JK,” “LOL,” and :>) are common symbols used in writing to indicate the harmlessness of a potentially sarcastic remark; when speaking, making “air quotes” with the fingers serves the same purpose.)

People who routinely use sarcasm usually believe (or want to believe) that it’s socially acceptable to communicate this way. If someone gets his feelings hurt by sarcasm, he’s a poor sport or too sensitive. (This tactic, by the way, is known as “blaming the victim.”)

The results of sarcasm

Between very close friends, use of sarcasm can be, ironically, a bonding

mechanism. The reasoning is that the friends are close enough to know that the sarcasm is kindly meant. Outsiders may be shocked at the seeming viciousness of the sarcasm, but the friends know better.

Or do they? The problem with sarcasm is that you never know how your sarcastic comment will be taken. If your friend is having a tough day, the snarky, sarcastic remark might cut too close to the bone and really hurt. Or if your friend has been disloyal, or is contemplating disloyalty, the sarcastic remark may be taken as a direct threat. His guilty conscience cause him to overreact, leading to all kinds of misunderstandings.

A sarcastic remark aimed at someone who can’t respond in the same way (due to a power imbalance, for example) can awaken hostility in that person—hostility that may come out later in a surprising way. School shootings like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado illustrate the “time-bomb” nature of sarcasm. The two students who became mass murderers had been the objects of incessant sarcastic remarks over the years. When they took their revenge, they killed both their tormenters and anyone else in their line of sight.

Responses to sarcasm

You can deprive sarcasm of its sting by taking the sarcastic remark literally. To “Great haircut!” you reply, “thanks!” with a sincere smile. People may think you are slow-witted, but they will probably stop the sarcastic remarks.

It’s tempting to respond to sarcasm with sarcasm of your own. Often this is acceptable—in fact, in certain social circles, sarcastic repartee is considered clever. Just bear in mind that sarcasm cuts the flesh. Be careful of the knife!